

10 Far from the madding crowd

Big cats on Dartmoor and in Dorset, UK

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Introduction

According to recent accounts by social scientists and environmentalists (widely supported by scientists and governmental agencies), most claims and beliefs about the presence of so-called ‘alien big cats’ (henceforth big cats) in Britain are largely imagined fantasies, social constructions and media-driven hysterias (Buller 2004; 2009; Monbiot 2013). The key elements of this story are as follows: a few big cats, escapees, have been found but a belief arose around the preposterous (and unproven) possibility of their surviving and breeding in the countryside; a number of cult-like cryptozoological groups have formed to study and monitor these animals (developing imaginaries that link these cats to other mythic and primordial bestiaries); the press have picked up on these stories and instead of promoting a healthy scepticism they have reinforced a positive sense of their presence, particularly around the rural hinterlands of cities and towns; and in turn, the constant stream of big-cat stories has served to create a solid sense of their presence in the countryside and thus other animals are mistaken for them in the half-light and shadows, predominantly by urbanites. This desire to believe in their presence draws on very deep-seated meanings and changing relationships between British society and British nature. Such sightings are likened to the long history of imaginary beasts in the UK and a yearned-for return of true wildness. In short, it appears that people now believe them to be there, but more than that, they *want* them to be there, they have become the focus for a new form of *aelurophilia*, or ‘love of (in this case feral) big cats’.

According to accounts by Monbiot (2013) and Buller (2004; 2009), in pre-scientific Britain, the countryside resounded with all manner of wild animals, beasts, dragons and dangerous spirits. These gave a sharp definition (an important binary boundary) to a sense of humanity, society and culture, a sense of self and of ontological security. The advent of natural history in the seventeenth century, with its rational and empirical ontology, chased the imagined bestiary away while the extension of hunting and bounties killed the last of the wolves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. With its remaining stock of ‘meek’ native animals so tightly nestled into the remaining

and highly ordered spaces of hedgerow, coppice, woodland and meadow, the UK had become barely wild at all. Then, modern farming methods rendered the countryside even more controlled, tame and domesticated with decreasing amounts of habitat.

What we are left with is safe and sanitised nature, a complete reversal from the time when the non-urban used to be a wild place, where nymphs lured homebound warriors and where dark forces lay in wait. Pre-industrial civilisation hid behind the city walls. Post-industrial civilisation on the other hand, having tamed nature, spurns the city for the safety of the suburb and country.

(Buller 2009: 10)

However, as cities greened and gained urban forests through suburbanisation and garden city movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the boundaries between city and countryside, culture and nature began to blur, break down and hybridise. Rare animals like the dormouse (*Muscardinus avellanarius*), peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) and properly wild animals such as the fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) and badger (*Meles meles*) took refuge in suburban gardens and parks. According to this story, under such circumstances older ontological coordinates of self and society also break down, leading inevitably to the search for order elsewhere. As Henry Buller argues:

If the human and the non-human elements of the countryside are to be bound together in a new relational hybridity, where should the former look for the necessary boundaries that define their own difference and offer the enduring psychological reassurance of knowing that the 'inside' can only exist if there is an 'outside' beyond it? In other words, *we still need the wild*.

(2009: 13)

Or more specifically:

these feline messengers reveal our society's essential ambivalence towards the 'Promethean Fear' of Nature's power and ability to resist human appropriation. Nature not only needs to be conceptualised as 'outside' and 'other', it needs to be perceived as such.

(Buller 2009: 23)

So, the vast majority of big cat sightings are not real (though they gain credibility from a few real cases) but an artefact of a deep-seated longing for a natural order to be re-established.

Whatmore and Thorne (1998) and Wolch and Emel (1995) show how recent anxieties about environmental degradation, bio-ethical displacement and species eradications have shifted attention onto defining and legitimating

'true nature' as wildness, and in spatial terms, wilderness (Franklin 2006). This too has driven more vivid binary pairings such as 'them/there – us/here, society-nature, domesticated-wild and so on' (Buller 2004: 14). However plausible, the binaries relevant to anthropological enquiry are always grounded in the culture and society of *specific people*, and the focus and perspective of Buller's (and Monbiot's) analyses are almost entirely focussed on a *generalised* urban population and culture. First, as Buller argues, the alien (i.e. non-endemic) cat phenomenon can be understood by 'modern urban society's impatience with rural nature's all too "human face"' (Buller 2009: 23). Second, he argues that big cat sightings are mostly made by urban people and 'appear to occur most often in the accessible and essentially urbanised countryside of major roads, low-density housing estates and proximal metropolis' (2009: 17). Buller is influenced by the writing of Mike Davis in relation to the mountain lion phenomenon in Los Angeles: 'The Otherness of wild animals is the gestalt which we are constantly refashioning in the image of our own urban confusion and alienation' (Davis 1998: 267 in Buller 2009: 22).

While the evidence shows that indeed some sightings are made in urban hinterlands, it is a gross exaggeration to claim that they are an urban or peri-urban phenomenon. In fact, a substantial number of sightings, possibly the majority, occur in deeper rural locations and most of the hot spots are close to wild areas and away from any major city (e.g. Dorset, the Forest of Dean, Dartmoor, and rural Wales). This means that any analysis which rests on the structural contrast and significance of the urban–wild boundary cannot make an adequate *general* account of big cat sightings in the UK.

There are also problems associated with Buller's view that the big cats 'have meaning' but 'exist [mostly] in non-material terms'. Hurn's (2009) paper reports that there was robust published forensic evidence for the big cats in her locality (Coard 2007; Smith et al. 2006) that substantiated her respondents' view that the big cats are real and known, if few in number (see also Hurn, this volume).

Buller's view is shared by many other commentators, including tellingly perhaps, many governmental and scientific organisations (Wilbert 2006; Hurn 2009). But their 'contestation' should properly be made an element of the analysis, a view to be explored *sociologically*, rather than taken at face value. It is commonly reported that the small number of failed intensive efforts to capture incontrovertible scientific evidence is testament to big cats' mythic status, yet this is never set against comparative scientific research elsewhere. Following up on claims that there are lynx in Dorset, UK, I went to remote Fulufjället National Park in Dalarna, Sweden, a stronghold of the European lynx (*Lynx lynx*). Rangers there told me that they are incredibly hard to see. So hard, in fact, that the regular lynx census exercises have to use reindeer kills as a proxy co-efficient for individual animals. Yet unexplained kills are not conventionally taken as evidence in the UK, although some experts have confirmed big cat predation in this way (see Smith et al. 2006; Coard 2007; Hurn 2009).

In Buller's account attention is focused predominantly on human sightings and the dialogue and myth making that stemmed from them. The fact that there are instances of recorded and scientifically validated cases of non-native cats at large in Britain is not adequately dealt with, and particularly so in instances where the scientific/governmental communities (who have largely supported the 'myth' hypothesis) have been shown to hide firm evidence from the public gaze. The fact that very significant numbers of non-native cats were imported and kept in private collections, zoos and as individual 'pets' remains at once acknowledged and detached from the 'mythic sightings' narrative.

Buller recognises that the myth-making is based on extrapolations from a few plausible or proven cases of big cat escapees (and here he makes much of Serres' interest in how the real and imaginary take on an independent life of their own as intermediaries or 'angels', to use Serres' [2003] term), but throughout his article he is predominantly scathing of claims of their more widespread presence. Nonetheless he is not above exaggeration himself – at one point, for example, he notes that 'it is rather comforting to learn that the English countryside offers "optimum conditions" for the reproduction of lion and tigers', but this was clearly included to discredit big cat sightings and organisations rather than reflect fairly on their claims which barely ever mention these species. Curiously, biologist Ross Barnett used the same exaggeration to discredit significance being attached to the story of a puma (*Puma concolor*) that was captured in Inverness-shire in 1980. He said: 'It's all very good saying you saw a lion in Essex or a tiger in Shropshire, or wherever. But it is very difficult to estimate size of a species from a distance – especially if you are unfamiliar with them' (Morelle 2013). Why refer to animals that are barely mentioned in big cat sightings, if not to cast doubt on the veracity of reporting?

Second, Buller's socio-cultural environmental history is sketchy at best and there is a failure to explain why it is that non-native and very exotic cats could be deemed *fitting* animals to restore a sense of lost wildness. If such a longing existed, then the British would be surely be doing what the Swedes, Canadians and Norwegians have done: to restore their own 'dangerous wild animals' in the form of wolves (*Canis lupus lupus*), boars (*Sus scrofa*) and bears (*Ursus arctos arctos*) (Marvin 2011a; 2011b; Pretty 2007; Whatmore and Thorn 1998). However such enthusiasm is, at best, half-hearted (Marvin 2011a).

Ritvo (1987) has shown how Britain's long legacy as an imperial culture has had a crucial bearing on its human–animal relations. The apparent British liking for big cats may be explained in the same way they have embraced and tolerated other exotic species in contemporary landscapes (e.g. muntjac deer [*Muntiacus reevesi*], parakeets [*Myiopsitta monachus* and *Psittacula krameri*] and wallabies [*Macropus rufogriseus*]). As an imperial culture predicated as much on acquiring and adding new entities to its sense of self as it was on defending its indigenous order, the popularity of importing big cats, zoological gardens and tolerance of established wild populations is perfectly consistent.

British imperial culture was, in many senses, a recovery of classical models that sought the *civilisation* of wildness rather than its glorification, and this was born out by British enthusiasm for the acclimatisation movement in the nineteenth century. In Australia for example, there was an audacious reordering of nature where (choice) imported species were cultivated and favoured in place of (inferior) indigenous species (Franklin 2012; Ritvo 2010). Since the Romano-British period, British nature was steadily added to – a process that accelerated considerably after the sixteenth century (Thomas 1983) – without much in the way of reaction or reversal.

Another possibility is that this alleged *desire* for big cats is misplaced or simply wrong. Perhaps, they really *are* there and a belief is sustained through regular sightings of them. This is clearly the case for the large cluster of sightings recorded for the remote Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire during the 2000s. These also remained speculative and ‘mythic’ until, under a Freedom of Information request to the Forestry Commission (FC), it was ‘revealed by the scientists that the government agency confirmed that two “reliable” sightings of large cats have taken place in the last seven years’ (Woodward 2009). Why were they not reported in the proper way? Could it possibly be because the Forest of Dean is a major commodified leisure facility and an important investment of the FC? They know that people are actually sensible: they don’t want big cats in the forests where their children come to learn and play.

The ‘longing for the wild’ thesis is problematic because it rests too much on reported sightings and newspaper accounts *and* places too much emphasis on their urban origins. In Hurn’s (2009) case a different story emerged because instead of using sightings as primary data, she embarked on a qualitative investigation *in the area where they were seen*. In this case, the sightings could be related to beliefs and knowledge that only made sense once they were placed in their wider social and historical context (see also Hurn, this volume). It begged the question as to whether this was a one-off or whether similar results might be found if a similar investigation were conducted elsewhere.

Findings from a locality-based approach in Dartmoor, Devon and North Dorset

Fieldwork was conducted in two case study areas in a rural (North Dorset) and remote (Dartmoor) area of England for ten weeks in spring 2011. An ethnographic approach was adopted in which I visited particular villages and hamlets (where sightings had been reported) with the aim of talking to as many people as possible, rather than conducting formal interviews. In the very gregarious spaces of pubs, cafes, footpaths and local stores it is easy to fall into conversation with people and gauge how significant big cat sightings have been and what local people think about them. Forty significant conversations were recorded and these were augmented by a wide range of other exchanges, observations and more formal talks with local experts and

professionals. Walking the local footpaths also gave an understanding of the environment in which sightings take place and assisted in following conversations set in local geographies. Tourism research (e.g. Ryan 1995) has shown how the researcher can participate in a locality as a visitor and still produce useful observational and conversational data while not actually staying for significantly long periods or conducting formal interviews, especially where interviews might be difficult to arrange spontaneously among people moving through landscapes. Data from a similar conversational methodology usefully informed Hurn's study of big cat encounters in Wales (Hurn 2009: 9), although Hurn was a long-term resident and immersed in the life of the local community.

I visited a few villages and small towns on the upper slopes and high country of Dartmoor over a period spanning January to mid-February 2011, and in North Dorset over two periods in April and June 2011. In both localities tourism has been a valued and essential feature of the local economy for over 100 years and so an enquiring tourist is neither unusual nor avoided. The ubiquitous presence of people with either dogs or in clothes that indicated they had been working with farm animals made beginning conversations about big cats very easy. I could open conversations by expressing concern about the dangers of big cats to their dog or lambs.

Dartmoor

Dartmoor is an upland area of some 950 square kilometres in south Devon, England, which is protected by its National Park status. It is an ancient weathered mass of granite from the Carboniferous period forming a very wild and exposed upper expanse of moor reaching to 621 metres above sea level, with richly wooded lower slopes. It is sparsely populated across its high saddle but has a series of thriving towns around its lower points, most of them medieval stannary towns. Licensed by the Crown to produce and distribute tin, they became wealthy centres of tin mining, sale and minting with their own parliaments.

In Dartmoor it was striking how most reporting hot spots were not out on the open country of the moor (which has a lot of visitation from city-based tourists) but closer to areas less popular with tourists where the moor meets denser woodland and more mixed habitat/cover. At first, there also seemed no reason why there should be more sightings in the northeastern sector that included the towns of Chagford, Moretonhampstead, Postbridge and Okehampton. But when one walks there and looks closely at Ordnance Survey maps it is apparent that this area is adjacent to the greatest stands of forest, particularly at Fernworthy (pine) and west of Chagford (very mixed). Feasibly, big cats could be well hidden and adequately nourished in such landscapes.

Fieldwork was carried out on the lower-slope towns of Moretonhampstead, Okehampton, Chagford and the higher village of Postbridge. These were

selected for their consistent records of big cat sightings in the areas around them, not least in reports to police that emerged from Freedom of Information enquiries. Conversations confirmed the notion that sightings were more concentrated than would be the case if they were merely the result of generalised and wilful imagination. For example, at Okehampton, a small town with lower lying and more open farmed country around it, conversations in cafes, charity shops, and on the street produced no sightings stories. At the local library a librarian also had little to report. At a veterinary practice, vets confirmed no reports of local sightings or attacks on livestock or companion animals that were attributed to big cats. However, they did tell me there *were* many such reports further west, in Chagford and also at Castle Drogo.

At Chagford, 9 February 2011, 11 a.m.

Chagford is an exceedingly wealthy Devonshire town. It has many famous celebrity residents, including British comedian Jennifer Saunders and her husband, the comedian Adrian Edmondson. Its buildings are in an opulent medieval style and not what you would expect in such a remote area. Most of the official and municipal buildings, including the parliament building, are set around a central square. There is one pub on the square that I entered at mid-morning for a coffee. I noticed a group of seven senior citizens also having coffee. By their accents and dress I could infer they were Devonshire rural middle-class people, possibly landowners or farmers. One couple had a dog which I made a fuss of and we fell into conversation for a while as the group sat down at a nearby table. I mentioned talking to a villager with a small dog who had sighted a big cat and this created a lively conversation with a wide variety of stories and rumours recounted. But one man remained sceptical and laughed at the very notion, and his assertive scorn soon closed the conversation down. However, as I remained standing by the bar, one by one the other members of the group came forward to tell me their big cat story, reluctant, it seemed, to do so more publicly. One retired woman had a small white dog and had been used to taking it for a walk, beginning at the village church wicket gate that opened onto a wooded hillside. She claimed to have seen a big cat there and no longer ventured outside the built area of the village.

A more elderly woman in her eighties who had remained quiet during the conversation around their table came up to tell me that she had been brought up in the local manor and that as a girl she was frequently taken to London and shown the exotic animals on sale in Harrods. She said these included many big cats and that in the 1930s most of the big houses in the locality had small menageries that included big cats, including her own house. Then she told me how, during the Second World War, when only the women and a skeleton staff of other women were left, they decided to liberate the big cats because there was not enough food to feed them. She said that she has felt terrible ever since, at first for the welfare of the cats, and later for people and farmers when the first sightings of 'wild' big cats occurred. To obtain such a

‘foundation’ story after hearing so many sightings stories was not anticipated but it highlights something that is not at all unusual or remarkable. The wealthy landowning class was both numerous and evenly scattered, particularly across southern England, and they had a well-known liking for keeping exotic animal menageries, no doubt emulating the major royal and courtly homes. There was an established and extensive trade catering to a nation-wide obsession for private menageries: Harrods, for example, opened an exotic pets department in the 1890s. As early as the 1760s

a distinct geography of animal exhibitions and commerce had emerged in London as animal merchants and menageries lined the Strand, Piccadilly and St James’s. In the following decades and certainly by the 1800s they would proliferate to the extent that it was possible to walk through West London and see all the principal ‘animals of importance’.

(Plumb 2010: 55)

This barely regulated trade continued until 1976 when an Act of Parliament made the keeping of such animals prohibitively expensive. At this time, it is alleged that a lot of owners liberated them rather than upgrade their accommodation and security to that required by the new Act (e.g. Hurn 2009). If the extent of big cat sales could be verified, and if menageries as fashionable cultural or status symbols could be linked to specific country houses in certain districts, it is not only possible but very likely that local people experienced the presence of escapees and liberations over some considerable period of time. For example, in 1903 a Canadian lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) was donated to Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, where it has been in store ever since. According to Morelle (2013) ‘The museum’s records state that it had been shot after attacking and killing two dogs close to Newton Abbot in Devon.’ Newton Abbot is a mere 19 miles or a 35-minute drive from Chagford on the edge of Dartmoor, and certainly within the district referred to by the respondent above. It would not take very many such animals to create sufficient sightings for them to become an entrenched element of local wildlife, and would not require the animals to establish a breeding colony.

Later that evening in another pub, the young woman serving behind the bar asked me why I was visiting Chagford and I told her about my interest in big cat sightings. She told me that this was a major topic of conversation and that she and her girlfriend had seen a big cat at close quarters while walking back from a village pub nearby. She reported being so scared that they had to call her father to come and pick them up. This was about a year before. The story seemed genuine, but its veracity is less important than how it relates to a body of local stories and local knowledge about an environment in which there were big cats, or there had been and *could* be still. This is very different to a media-driven imaginary among urbanites who become excited at the prospect of true wildness returning to the outer areas of their everyday. For this woman, the encounter *was* her everyday and it was not romantic but scary and unnerving. She may

have taken pleasure in relating the story but I did not detect the tell-tale sign of sensation, rather the more practical tones of risk management.

At Postbridge Post Office, 7 February 2011, 10.30 a.m.

Postbridge is a small village that lies between the lower and higher slopes of Dartmoor, and with its thirteenth-century clapper bridge built to carry tin across the East Dart River is a popular stopping point for tourists. It is in an area where several big cat sightings had been reported. I entered the Post Office and had a look around its general stores facilities, its cream tearooms beyond, and through its postcard stand. Were there cryptozoological cards of the big cats of Dartmoor for tourists to buy, maybe? No, there were not. Despite the number of sightings and the growing fame of Devon's moorland 'beasts', it had not been commercialised at all, certainly not along the lines of the Loch Ness Monster, for instance.

There were two other people in the Post Office. A woman in her fifties was perusing cards and another a woman in her sixties was transacting business at the counter. Both women were in working attire. The former was dressed in horse riding gear while the latter was dressed in warm clothing with clear signs of having been handling sheep. As the woman in shepherding gear completed her transaction I was behind her waiting to pay for some postcards. She had a small spaniel with her and I said, 'I bet you have to be careful with her – what with all these big cats around here!' It was a conversation starter I invariably used (everyone had a dog around here) and was designed to suggest the inevitable curiosity of visitors to this area. She startled me by saying 'Don't you joke about it young man, we've had them on our farm and it is not a laughing matter!' She went on to recount how one day her mother had called her to see a huge cat that was just outside their kitchen window near some penned sheep. She raced to open the door and the cat jumped up onto a wall and ran out behind the house and into cover. She had seen it from no less than five metres away. It was sandy coloured and a very large animal, the size of a large dog. 'But a dog could not have jumped onto that wall, moved like that or looked like that.' She had not seen it again.

By this time the other woman, who was not known to the first, had come to pay for her card. She had heard the conversation and she joined in:

We have had them over at our place, for sure, they have been seen and actually one of our ponies was attacked and seriously injured. The vet could not understand the injuries and nor could we. Not a dog, definitely not a fox. There is not a lot it could have been besides these!

Here were two seemingly credible stories from a visit to one very remote Post Office in the middle of nowhere; both appeared to be sensible, educated women – typical small farmers in this area. However, neither incident had been reported.

Then the postmistress began her own story. She and her husband had a farm nearby and they saw a big cat at close range near their new chicken shed and it had actually left a paw mark on some setting concrete. This was not reported either. She then recounted several other stories that had been told to her over the counter. The Post Office being something of a local epicentre, she had collected incidents from places in all directions, and Chagford was mentioned several times. I tried to summarise what the women had said to me. Did they think that big cats were widely experienced in the locality, that this morning's meeting was not just a lucky coincidence for me? 'Yes', the postmistress said, 'you will find that more or less everyone around here has seen or heard of something'. I left feeling that I should return and spend more time following up these accounts, and paw prints!

Dorset

The county of Dorset is the easternmost part of the 'West Country' (i.e. southwest England) and ostensibly has changed very little in the twentieth century. It is one of the few counties not to have a major motorway running through it, and most of Dorset grades down to the roads created in the early part of the twentieth and the latter part of the nineteenth centuries. In agricultural terms it is a dairy and mixed farming area with a great deal of pasture set on its open chalk downland. In addition to very extensive woodland there are also huge swathes of Forestry Commission pine forests. Dorset was the only county to have its own active big cat organisation (Dorset Big Cats) and its detailed information about sightings was a starting point for choosing a locality to study. Three areas stood out for their intensity of sightings. The first is the Stour valley from the north, between Sherbourne and Shaftesbury, to the southern villages around Blandford Forum. The second is the River Frome valley that describes a line passing through Dorchester on a northeast-southwest axis. The third is the countryside around Bridport.

These sightings are very clustered (see Harpur 2008 for a map), far from spatially random sightings, and the territories they describe are very specific. The country around Bridport is very sparsely populated in every direction, it has a wide diversity of habitats and it has a great abundance of food sources, both wild and domestic. Walking around in this part of Dorset one is struck by the absence of humanity for most of the day wherever one walks. The Frome valley is also extremely diverse, with an abundance of cover, year round water and corridors of country linking areas of woodland. The Stour valley has a similar network of corridors between forests and woods but it has much larger tracts of woodland, and also wilder uplands on its line of chalk hills, most of them former Iron Age hill forts. Walking around this area I saw an abundance of rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*), badgers (*Meles meles*), roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) and foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) as well as domestic sheep and cattle.

I decided to home in on the Stour valley because of a spate of sightings that had occurred in recent years, in addition to the consistency of these

sightings. Almost invariably the cats seen were large and dark. The other intriguing thing is that almost all of the sightings had been made by locals such as farmers and other native Dorset people as opposed to the group who are slowly displacing them as residents: affluent middle-class Londoners seeking either a holiday home or a move to the country. Some idea of the extent of this in-migration was given by a village doctor who had lived in one of my case study villages for most of his professional life. In the parish magazine he wrote an article about how the village had been transformed from a working village with its manor house, its farmers, its small professional group and its majority of skilled and unskilled rural workers and small businesses, to a village of largely part-time middle-class residents, urban retirees from London and a group of working middle-class professionals. Only the farming families had remained on the land and it is mostly they who are still working there in the early morning and late in the day when most sightings are made.

In this particular village one of the farmers walked around his land twice a day, every day. He knew every inch of that landscape. He was born there and had only ever worked there. Knowing the local wildlife intimately he was also a big cat sceptic until one day, he saw a large black cat running across the yard at the back of his house. It was not a great distance and he saw it very well. He did not report it and felt reluctant to talk about it, fearing that others would not believe him. That is, until he spoke to a friend, a local retired electrician, who said that on the same day he himself had seen a large dark cat some thirty metres away. His friend had the advantage of seeing it against the grid of a wide, five-bar field gate and he reckoned it was about the size of a large dog with a very long tail, thicker at the base than that of a domestic cat. Like the farmer's sighting, the cat was soon away into the tall grasses and hedges that lined the path. From there, this creature, whatever it was, was a mere 100 metres away from the cover of a copse, and beyond that a corridor of woodland that stretched deep into uninhabited hills. On two subsequent walks around this area I made two observations. The first occurred on a very early morning walk out of the village and up high into the chalk hills above it. When I reached the summit, I saw a fox in the distance, a large male in peak condition. Although the light was far from good I was able to make this accurate assessment from at least 400 metres away, possibly more. It made me realise that the farmer and the electrician who had been looking out onto this hill all their lives would surely not mistake a big cat for some other animal. The second observation was that this entire area had interlocking woodland, some of it particularly dense, overgrown and impenetrable; certainly a habitat that could conceal a big cat.

The electrician had never reported his sighting. Having got to know these two men, their reputations and characters, it was very hard not to believe their stories. In both cases they were natural sceptics, plain talking and not prone to exaggeration: in fact the opposite was the case, they were men of few words but what they said was intelligent and insightful. Neither were aware of another story involving another black cat and a farmer on one of the nearby

chalk hills, no more than five miles away. A roe deer carcass was found some eight feet into the fork of a large beech tree in one of this farmer's woods, where it subsequently rotted. This caching of prey with the intention of removing it from other predators would indeed be the style of a medium-to-large felid. According to the farmer, he permitted deer stalkers to keep roe deer numbers down, and a stalker he spoke to said that they do occasionally leave a carcass up a in tree until they have time to retrieve it. However, without a ladder no hunter could have lifted a deer so high, begging the question, how did it get there? He did not have an internet connection and was unaware of seven other sightings in the immediate area as reported only to Dorset Big Cats.

In this district I spoke to only one person who had no direct or indirect experience of big cats. Everyone else (fourteen individuals) had a story. Nobody I spoke to had reported their sightings to the police or the newspaper or to Dorset Big Cats and, like the farmer and electrician cited above, most people were somewhat reluctant to talk about their experiences openly. I heard that many farmers keep sightings quiet because they wished to be able to kill the animals without interference from protective authorities (cf. Hurn 2009).

When I asked a Dorset Wildlife Trust officer working in a nearby town whether he believed there were big cats in the area he was unequivocal.

They are real alright. I know a lot of the people who have seen them and they would know very well. They are country people; they know all the native wildlife and would soon spot something unusual. I know their individual powers of observation and knowledge so they are trustworthy. Plus they have no reason to lie [...] They are European lynx mainly, a few pumas and regular sightings of black panthers. I think a lot of them are coming over from the New Forest, coming into Dorset via the area around Ringwood. They are up the Stour valley and especially in and around those huge Forestry Commission forests in the Wareham area [...] There's about eight solid sightings a year, and most of those have photos [...] they are consistent with big cats but they never get close enough for an ideal photo; well, these cats are so elusive, so scared of humans they always see or sense you before you see them and so inevitably the photos are almost always from some distance. But you can tell even with these by the thickness of the tail as a proportion of their body. They could not be domestic cats or dogs, you can see that. Also the tails are too long and carried in a different way or short in the case of the lynx. Most of them are pale or lightish coloured, so that's consistent with a European lynx or puma. Many appear black [...] there have been bodies found, often they are unhealthy with mange and very thin; some of them there's nothing to them [...] they're probably too ill to breed. Some have been found by Forestry Commission photo census of deer; most have been taken by the big cat societies; if they get wind of a sighting they will get in there and look for evidence of their tracks or kills and they will set up trip-wired

cameras all over [...] they want to know as much as they can you see, document them here.

There is also a hunting and fishing store locally and the workers there are a good source of information on local wildlife. Have hunters reported seeing big cats in the area? The joint owners contributed to this summarised response:

Oh yes. A lot of our clients have seen something over the years but very recently a really good hunter, one of our regulars, was actually attacked by one. Quite seriously actually, had to be treated in hospital. He was walking back from a rough shoot and he had some game on him and he reckons he was stalked. Anyway, the injuries were quite ferocious. This was over Wareham way, in among those big Forestry Commission forests. He had seen cats in there before but this was his first close encounter sort of thing! He is very shaken up. Could not have been a dog because of the claw marks and tears and it was too big for a domestic cat. He reckoned it was a lynx.

The truth of these sightings is arguably less interesting here than their meaning for local people. The respondents I spoke to in Dorset gave no indication that these animals represented a yearned-for return of true wildness. Generalising across their responses one would have to conclude that the most common and immediate response was that these animals could mean trouble. This was clearly evident in the tone of the men in the hunting shop and it was implicit in the accounts of others. There are serious consequences to having a large predator on the loose, presenting a hazard to human as well as non-human life. Therefore, perhaps unsurprisingly, the overwhelming response to the presence of big cats was negative, albeit accompanied by the belief that there cannot be many of them, and the knowledge that they are secretive and mostly nocturnal.

What respondents think about these sightings arguably depends on how they explain their origins. A breeding population embedded as a feature of the countryside is an altogether different problem to the transient presence of a few rogue individuals who have escaped from a zoo or some other source of captivity. The people I spoke to ranged from those who had not really thought much about the source of big cats in the area to those who subscribed to the latter view. It is common knowledge that many rock stars live in Dorset and Gloucestershire, and I also encountered unverified rumours that they and some remote-living drug dealers have kept big cats at various times. This area of Dorset also has a very large number of manors and, as noted earlier in relation to Chagford, many of these would have had menageries in the past. However, there is a widespread sense that this is a recent, post-1970s phenomenon in the wake of the Dangerous Wild Animals Act which came into force in 1976. So big cat sightings could be consistent with changes to the legal status of these animals. There is no doubt that people enjoy telling (and

hearing) sightings stories but one is also aware that despite the reality of sightings for those who experience them, they also exist in a general condition of *disbelief*. The sighters and those receiving the story are never quite fully convinced, even though they cannot find any other way of describing what they saw.

Conclusion

This chapter challenged the hypothesis presented in existing academic accounts (e.g. Buller 2009) that the feral big cat phenomenon in the UK is largely an urban fantasy stimulated by a crisis in ontological security. According to such a view, an external wild nature that had always provided shape and definition to civil sensibilities and society has been steadily eroded, leaving people confused and disorientated. The recovery of wildness through the continuing presence of potentially dangerous big cats offered the possibility of redemption, a return to the true order of the world where humanity was once again checked and balanced by nature. This thesis draws on the very widespread enthusiasm for wildness, wilderness and the re-wilding of environments in modern nations around the world, as well as on the notion of deep historic pasts, inhabited by monsters and beasts. It offers a feasible account of big cat sightings as mythic rather than true and as belonging to urban rather than rural cultures.

I have argued that this thesis has many flaws. Taking evidence mostly from town- and city-based local newspaper reports (Buller 2004; 2009; Monbiot 2013) results in an urban bias, which, as has been shown, is not reflected in the true pattern of sightings, reported or otherwise. In fact, this pattern shows very intense concentrations in remote and rural parts of England that would not fit the urban thesis or a more generalised pan-British ‘fantasy’ thesis (if the same sentiments might be claimed for the entire population). Further, such an argument fails to consider why the UK has been largely unenthusiastic towards re-wilding policies involving its own indigenous large carnivores such as wolves, bears or lynx, thus casting some considerable doubt as to why non-indigenous animals from South America, Africa, or North America might be deemed more relevant or acceptable.

There are other possible explanations that better fit the evidence, particularly the historical precedent for non-endemic big cat ownership in rural areas. Indeed, the re-wilding thesis overlooks Britain’s historical status as an *imperial* culture and in particular, the tendency of the landed gentry to add or collect ‘exotic’ cultural and natural elements as part of their social identity. The thesis also downplays or ignores the narratives surrounding how they potentially became embedded in the English countryside, initially as parts of menageries and then as escapees or releases. There is no doubt that a trickle of escapees would have been a feature of such private collections, as would releases during times of hardship and in the 1970s following new legislation related to keeping such animals in captivity (see also Hurn 2009).

The chapter reported on fieldwork conducted in two very different rural localities where there was elevated and spatially concentrated reporting of big

cat sightings (in addition to a large number of unreported sightings which only became apparent during the course of empirical research). These places were characterised by their proximity to environments suitable for medium-to-large non-endemic cats such as lynx or leopards and a local history of their presence there. Most local people encountered in these places had direct experience or sightings of big cats themselves or had encountered these animals indirectly through family and friendship networks. Their presence was mostly regarded as a reality and not particularly remarkable, to the point where many encounters were not reported to the authorities, but they certainly were not regarded with any great enthusiasm. Predictably, for cultures and individuals with instrumental and less romantic views of the countryside, practical matters weighed most heavily when it came to attributing meaning to sightings, with the balance of opinion erring on the side of inconvenience and risk. Since livestock were believed to be attacked, companion animals were thought to be at risk, and incomes made from tourism might also be threatened by the presence of large predators, reporting to authorities, active big cat enthusiasts and the media made little sense. Reading between the lines, I felt these individuals wanted to manage big cats, if they ever came across them, in their own way. Hence, subsequent research might find rural under-reporting in addition to urban over-reporting. However, meanings and actions are always likely to be locally contingent with no overarching national response.

In this volume and in a previous publication Hurn (2009) reports evidence of sightings from Ceredigion, Wales. In remote West Wales 'sightings seemed to be rather common' and her case study suggests an entirely different reason why rural people may view big cats positively. In this context the positive identities ascribed to big cats derived from their identification as a symbol of resistance and liberation for the local Welsh community against historical and contemporary interference from outsiders (especially the English) and a natural antidote to an unwanted animal that was associated with those human outsiders: the fox.

Hurn suggests that the meanings of big cat experiences are socially contingent and symptomatic of the wider historical and social milieu of the localities into which big cats enter (or are seen). Her analysis reminds us that in matters of 'nature' and 'environment' meanings are rarely shared in the manner suggested by Buller's grand (and essentialist) narratives of urban/domestic versus rural/wild imaginaries. Rather, as McNaughton and Urry (1998) observe, they typically hinge on locally specific, contested natures and social conflict.

More work remains to be done but the results of this preliminary fieldwork undermine the commonly held 'mythical' view of the big cat phenomenon in the UK. They do not prove the existence of big cats so much as cast doubt on their purely imagined existence. There may be a very small number of them but it would only take a very small number to create an enormous *cultural* presence. Following Hurn (2009) this chapter suggests that views about big cat sightings are likely to depend very much on the *contingent* way they

configure within the historical and contemporary forms of human dwelling in the countryside (see Ingold 2000). The interview data and sheer volume of sightings supports Hurn's assertion that big cats have to be taken more seriously, and highlights the dangers of falling back on basic and simplistic binary oppositions when attempting to explain the complexity of human relationships to, with and in natural environments. Most of all it reaffirms the value of qualitative fieldwork and ethnography as a corrective to armchair theorising.

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